



St. Lucie County Legislative Update

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Our Mission....

To provide service, infrastructure and leadership necessary to advance a safe and sustainable community, maintain a high quality of life, and protect the natural environment for all our citizens.

NEGRON DESIGNATED AS NEXT SENATE PRESIDENT



State Sen. Joe Negron was formally elected president for 2016-18 in a Wednesday designation ceremony of the chamber's GOP caucus. Republicans outnumber Democrats 26-14. He will succeed current President Andy Gardiner after the 2016 Legislative Session.

His selection capped off a nearly two-year-long neck-and-neck and often contentious race between him and Sen. Jack Latvala. The Clearwater Republican ended the race by conceding to Negron this past month and agreeing to become Senate budget chief during his term.

In his acceptance speech, Negron laid out his leadership plan, including the billion-dollar spending boost in higher education. That would include money to recruit and retain faculty and refurbish or replace aging campus facilities.

He also called for solving South Florida's water pollution. The Indian River Lagoon estuary, along Indian River, St. Lucie and Martin counties, has long been tainted by agricultural-fertilizer runoff from nearby Lake Okeechobee.

But environmental advocates have been frustrated at the Legislature's take on funding Amendment 1, the state's constitutional provision passed last year that requires revenue from real estate taxes to be spent on the environment.

Negron said he was in favor of bonding, or borrowing money, to pay for conservation and remediation of the lake and its environment.

Negron, a lawyer in private practice, also said in his speech that Florida should stop "criminalizing adolescence." He used the example of his pelting passing cars with water balloons as a teen.

"Today, we would have been arrested," he said, adding that some juvenile matters can be handled outside traditional courtrooms. He mentioned civil citations for low-level offenses.



Watch Session Live:**Connect with
St. Lucie County!****Mark Satterlee**

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Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fort Walton Beach, will not pursue a plan that would have redistributed a portion of the money collected by local tourism development taxes to the state after meeting opposition from several counties and cities.

There is no need for now. Rep. Matt Gaetz told a Panama City Beach television station Thursday night that his plan to require counties to send 20 percent of bed tax revenue to the state was too controversial to move forward.



"We brought up the issue of setting aside a dedicated funding source for **Visit Florida**; the workability of that concept seems to have some real challenges," Gaetz [told WJHG-TV Channel 7](#). "So I don't expect there will ever be a vote on any legislation that will dedicate a funding source for Visit Florida from local tourist development councils."

There were already hints on social media that Gaetz had retreated from his plan, which also would have restricted how bed tax dollars, or tourist development taxes, can be used. [Asked on Facebook](#) whether he supported sending local tax dollars to the state, Gaetz said Thursday morning that there was no formal proposal.

Gaetz also said he will no longer push to give the **Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association** more control over which citizens serve on local tourist development council boards.

PANEL APPROVES MEASURE TO DIVERT MENTALLY ILL

The House Children, Families & Seniors Subcommittee unanimously approved a measure (HB 439) by Rep. Charles McBurney, R-Jacksonville, that would create new mental health programs and codify existing local measures in state law.

The bill creates a statewide framework for counties to offer mental health and other types of "problem-solving courts" that provide more individualized treatment for vulnerable populations like drug addicts, the mentally ill or veterans.

A number of counties including St. Lucie County, already operate those programs such courts, but eligibility and other requirements vary significantly.

Under the plan, county judges would additionally gain more power to direct misdemeanor offenders to treatment programs instead of jails, and the state would establish new pilot facilities in Duval, Broward and Miami-Dade that would serve as treatment centers for mentally ill individuals, many of whom must be restored to competency to stand trial.

Those facilities could cost the state as much as \$4.5 million, which led Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart, to ask whether counties could bear some of the costs. McBurney said it was possible, but that the Supreme Court's mental health task force had suggested that such a step could "greatly hamper trying to build these programs."

BILL TO ALLOW COUNTIES MORE AUTHORITY ON COURT FEE

HB 573 by Rep. Charlie Stone, R-Ocala, that would give counties more discretion over how to spend the roughly \$18 million generated statewide by a fee charged on those who commit traffic offenses passed its first stop in the House unanimously Dec. 2, 2015.

Currently state law distributes the fee's proceeds evenly between four funds that provide money for court innovations, lawfully mandated legal aid programs, law libraries and "juvenile alternatives" like teen courts, respectively. Unspent funds are rolled into the court innovation fund.

HB 573 repeals that split and allows individual county commissions to distribute the fee's proceeds between the four funds as they see fit.

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FEDERAL UPDATE

Provided by Van Scoyoc Associates

The House and Senate announced an agreement on surface transportation legislation and released a conference bill called the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act. The bill authorizes five years of transportation funding, including roughly \$205 billion for highway programs and \$48 billion for transit over the life of the bill. These are increases of approximately 15 percent and 18 percent, respectively, over current spending levels. The bill is fully paid for, relaying on cushion money from the Federal Reserve, as well as reducing the amount of interest the Fed pays to banks, among other budgetary items. It does not increase the gas tax, nor create a long-term, sustainable funding source.

As a reminder, the Senate passed its version of a surface transportation bill (known as the DRIVE Act) in July and the House passed its Surface Transportation Reauthorization and Reform (STRR) Act in early November. Both of those bills were six-years in length, but only included guaranteed funding for three years. Many transportation advocates pressed Congress to shorten the length of the bill in order to cut costs.

The current transportation authorization expires on Friday at 11:59pm. The deadline is tight, but Congress is expected to pass, and the President is expected to sign, the FAST Act prior to then.

We will be closely reviewing the legislation and putting together an analysis of it. However, given the bill's significant length (1301 pages, to be exact), this may take us a few days. So far, we do know that the FAST Act maintains the House's proposal to convert the Surface Transportation Program (STP) into a block grant and increases STP suballocations to local governments and MPOs by population by one percent annually, from 50 percent to 55 percent, over the life of the bill. The increased STP suballocations were something for which we advocated on the County's behalf.
